

Thersites

My laborious friend Thersites has always had a soft spot for Heracles. With his poor discipline record at school (he killed his teacher Linus with a chair), he did well to find a niche as a sort of roving trouble-shooter and football hooligan, and became much in demand when serpents needed strangling, rivers diverting, daughters deflowering and sickening displays of mindless violence organising (though he was never actually banned from Europe). His first marriage, to Megara, cannot be counted a success (however many children he had by her – and the authorities argue between three, four, five, seven and eight – he rather inconsiderately slaughtered them all in a fit of pique), but he seemed to be settling down well with Deianeira until he foolishly allowed her to take over his wardrobe. Persuading him to chuck out all his by now somewhat *passé* lion-skins, she inveigled him into sponsoring a new range of 'Nessus' designer clothes. His protests ('I'll die if anyone sees me in this') turned out to be prophetic and he became the first man in history to be killed by a shirt.

What Thersites had not realised, until Heracles let the story slip the other day, was the appalling trouble Heracles had in performing his twelve labours. He found himself in constant disputes with planners, environmentalists and the unions and is amazed he achieved even one labour, let alone twelve. Thersites immediately encouraged Heracles to set the record straight, and was much gratified when Heracles produced his diary. Heracles was pretty modest about allowing his literary endeavours to become more widely known but Thersites finally persuaded him that there was one outstandingly prestigious organ, with an especially brilliant and intelligent readership, that would jump at the chance of publishing them. He meant, of course, **Omnibus**.

Monday

After delicate negotiations with Thespius over the job-description and grading for the rape of his fifty daughters – I insist on no split-shifts, flexible roistering, increased 'unsocial hours' allowances, a one-out, all-out agreement and hefty solidarity bonus – I am on the point of raping the 48th when I am informed that I am in breach of manning-level agreements and should down tools at once. A period of intense activity ensues in the club, or was it with the club, as a result of which the logic of my position is considerably better understood and I finish the job, only to find I have missed the last Cup home. Off to the boozier.

Tuesday

Orders to fetch Cerberus from Hades. I negotiate an underground pass and a dog-handling allowance only for a demarcation dispute to arise: shouldn't a qualified dog-handler do the job? I point out that I've handled Nemean lions, Lernaean hydras, Diomedes' mares, Stymphalian birds, cattle, serpents and Centaurs in my time without any hint of trouble, and argue that three-headed dogs do not fall within the remit of union-accredited handlers. They back down. Win *per capita* 'extra-heads' allowance. When I get down there I find Charon in dispute with Styx-link Ferries over safety procedures. Project temporarily abandoned.

Wednesday

King Augeas summons me to Elis to clean his stables. I demand double the usual clothing and dirt allowances (lion-skirts are an absolute *brute* to clean) and am astonished when Augeas gives in to all my legitimate demands *and* makes a quite amazingly underisory pay-off into the bargain. When I arrive, I see the reason. It's a lock-out. The lads are refusing to clean the stables because they are too dirty, and insist on having them properly cleaned before they will agree to go back to work. But naturally, they are not allowing anyone *else* in to do the cleaning because that would break working agreements. The pickets are out in force. Intense negotiations are under way, and motions are being referred back and forth by the bucket-load (which does not help the situation in the stables).

On my arrival I am accused of colluding with Augeas in a bid to break the unions and privatise the cleaning services. So I refer my proposal to the Committee: clean the stables by diverting the rivers. The Committee expresses its doubts. They could see no reason why waterways should not be designated scab labour any more than humans, and there was the important principle of compensation entitlements to consider. The Committee could find no precedent for negotiating in such areas with a couple of rivers. But they agree to lay the matter before the Water Authority, to whom I then make my official diversion proposal.

This meets further opposition at planning stage from the environmentalist lobby, which argues that such a move would render the Authority liable to prosecution under the terms of the Clean Rivers (Pollution) Act, and threaten the carefully integrated walks infra-structure within the overall concept of a developing rural leisure facility. I point out that cattle-dung is in fact a well-known fertilising agent and that my scheme would carry it ongoingly over the whole plain, at negligible cost to the consumer and with great benefit to the infra-structure of the whole Elean economy, which would have important implications in the thrust for jobs; further, I indicate on the plans that the proposed diversion would in fact enhance the ongoing leisure facility potential of the overall structure-plan concept. I

emphasise the last point rather firmly with my club and the scheme is carried *nem. con.* Am invited to put in a compensation claim for club damage.

Thursday

The Pest Control Authority sends me on time-and-a-half to Mt. Erymanthus where a tremendous boar has been ravaging the neighbourhood. But the conservationist lobby is out in force, claiming that the boar is a protected species, really cuddly, and brings colour to the local community as well as promoting tourism and encouraging the return of the cabbage-white which feeds off its droppings. They are soon joined by the anti-hunting lobby and RSPCB who unfold their views on blood-sports with commendable clarity and charm. Indeed, so impressed am I by their arguments that I offer to enter into a traditional disputes procedure with them at once, but for some reason they do not seem keen on the idea. Finally we agree to an intervention from the Joint Arbitration and Conciliation Advisory Service (JACAS). We hammer out an agreement round the table after an all-night sitting (I do the hammering, they do the agreeing) and in the morning I set out with a remit to capture the boar but not to kill it. At this point I find my way blocked by representatives from the World Wildlife Action Group who demand equal opportunities for boars and enquire whether I intend to remove the boar from its natural habitat and place it in a Zoo. At this point something inside me snaps and the Action Group seems to lose its will for the debate. After all this, capturing the boar is an absolute piece of cake and I bring it back (do you know, it *is* rather cuddly), deposit it in the market-place and leave, feeling a good day's work has been done. The happy shrieks of the populace confirm me in my belief.

Friday

What an extraordinary request: I am asked to go and fetch Queen Hippolyta's *girdle*. Why can't she just put it in the post? Anyway, I put in a claim for danger money (how would *you* like to start fiddling with an Amazon's girdle?) and (It was at this point that Thersites tactfully suggested I end the extracts from Heracles' diary: Omnibus readers, he warned me, do not take kindly to vulgar sensationalism.)

The editor has received a folded tablet from 'Disgusted of Chios', expressing outrage that Thersites, whom he regards as 'the ugliest man who went to Troy', should have been allowed to inflict his loathsome opinions on the audience of Radio 4. It seems that this column was recently featured on the programme Education Matters.